



Integration of WebQuests into ESP Course Curriculum

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Abstract

It's common knowledge that nowadays students are greatly interested in everything connected with modern technologies in general and computer and internet in particular. So, naturally, wisely integrating the internet into course curriculum can contribute to the increase of student motivation. This can be particularly effective for language learning as students will be dealing with authentic language materials and real life situations. However, taking into account the fact that there is a questionable educational benefit in having learners surf the net without a clear task in mind and realizing that not everything that can be found in the World Wide Web can be considered a reliable source of information, it is important for the teacher to clearly set the task, correctly filter the information and lead the students into correct direction. Therefore, one of the best models of the internet integration into course curriculum can be the model of WebQuests first developed by Bernie Dodge, professor of Education at San-Diego University, USA (Dodge 1997). The model can be particularly effective when teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as quests can be tailored according to the area of students' specialization, which will allow students to combine their special interests with language learning. WebQuests employ constructive approach to learning and can

- *organize active inquiry- oriented activity both individually and in groups.*
- *develop creative thinking and problem solving skills*
- *encourage critical thinking skills including comparing, classifying, deducing etc.*

Web quests can cover only a single academic discipline, or comprise several interdisciplinary areas. Thus, for instance, during a language learning course, some issues related to their major may be explored by the students in the form of web quests.

In this paper I'd like to illustrate the effectiveness of interdisciplinary WebQuests directed at developing reading, listening, writing and speaking skills of ESP students at YSU. The model can be easily adapted to any particular discipline and can serve as an inspirational aid for the language teachers and motivational tool for the students.

Right before the turn of the millennium when innovative technology had already started to penetrate into every aspect of our life, professor of Education at San-Diego University, USA, Bernie Dodge conceived the idea of inquiry-oriented activity format in which most of the information that learners worked with came from the web. Together with a colleague, Tom March, he developed Web quest strategy to help teachers integrate the power of the Web into learning process. Even in the early days of development Webquests focused on the importance of combining authentic tasks with Internet resources to develop critical thinking skills. Since those early days, WebQuests have become really popular among educators. However, not always does the implementation of WebQuests correspond to the requirements of the real model. So-called WebQuests may bear a superficial resemblance to real WebQuests in that students use Internet resources to produce a technology-enhanced product. For example, students may prepare school presentations collecting facts and images regarding any particular topic, or, similarly they may create a poster or a brochure using resources of the internet. Of course, some reasonable degree of learning takes place as a result of all these activities as well; however, they can't be considered WebQuests because they fail to take into account the very purpose of Webquests; that is - transformation of the information through cooperative learning, critical thinking and problem solving activity. When the information from the Web simply goes from the browser to the product without altering or even entering the learner's understanding, it simply fails to realize the potential that it can offer.



In a real WebQuest, newly acquired information undergoes an important transformation within learners themselves. Getting information is the easy part. The WebQuest gets trickier and more fascinating in the next part, in which transformative learning takes place. It is at this stage that teachers and students should realize the powerful learning strategies which differentiate real WebQuests from mere Web-based activities.

According to B. Dodge [2] WebQuests have the following six components:

- A clear introduction that sets the stage for the activity and provides background information triggering the students' interest and enthusiasm.
- A feasible and interesting task that engages students in answering a complex open-ended question or solving a real -life problem. Students need first to learn some basic background information about the issue. Then, working in small groups, they become "experts" on some aspect of the problem by analyzing the Websites given to them by the teacher. Finally, they complete an activity related to real life by producing an output, e.g. a written report, an oral presentation, a multimedia presentation, a website.
- A set of information sources needed to complete the task. Teachers usually pre-select a few websites which provide background information for all learners, as well as specific websites for each student's role.
- A description and guidance of the process the learners should follow to complete the task. Resources may be embedded in the process section.
- Evaluation, usually in the form of a rubric that sets the assessment criteria for the students.
- A conclusion that closes the quest and encourages the learners to reflect on the process.

When it comes to an ESP course, Webquests seem to be ideally suitable for a content based instruction aimed at developing integrated skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing. At different stages of working on a WebQuest students have to use background knowledge from the discipline related to their major to assess the problem, read and listen to authentic language materials, evaluate information from different sources and synthesize a response to the main WebQuest problem materials. Providing students with interactive opportunities, which make the learning experience meaningful, this process gives students opportunities to explore how the target language is used and then spontaneously use the language in its correct way. Students engage in a learning process that leads them to use higher order thinking in order to transform information. A WebQuest can provide them with the project for a unit of study. After reading through a specific WebQuest, the teacher can then begin to select the objectives to be mastered. An alternative way to start could be to select objectives and then find a WebQuest that would help master those to be taught. Subsequently, the teacher can decide which enabling activities need to be taught.

B. Dodge [1] offers several WebQuest task types that can be adapted to any particular needs. They differ in the simplicity of performance and can accordingly be assigned to the students according to their language proficiency. Some of these task types are successfully employed during English classes at different faculties at YSU and all are accepted with great enthusiasm by both the students and the teachers. These different types of tasks exactly suit the aims that need to be addressed in ESP course. Each type of task adapted to serve a particular academic discipline provides learners with real-life experience of working in a group where students are provided with the opportunity to examine the task from different perspectives taking different roles. This encourages interdisciplinary perspectives, similar to what students will find in a real life setting. Finally, the WebQuest can lead to diverse outcomes (rather than a single correct response), deriving from the discussion and the different views of all the members of the group. Besides, different types of WebQuests can be adapted according to the language proficiency of the students. Thus, the elementary and pre-intermediate groups of undergraduate level were offered to complete the simplest and less challenging forms of WebQuests – Retelling and Compilation tasks. These types of tasks require students to absorb information and present it in the form of presentation or report. The task can be considered WebQuests only if the wording and the format of the report significantly differ from the information source and the students are given clear directions of how to organize their ideas and what to present. We frequently use the abovementioned task types as an introduction to the use of the web in an informative way. Being the least creative of all, they, nevertheless, foster language development



particularly the reading (sometimes listening) and writing skills and can be effective for developing paraphrasing and synthesizing skills. As an extension they can be continued by other task types.

With pre- intermediate and intermediate students we usually try mystery tasks, which are both challenging and fascinating. A well designed mystery task requires synthesis of information from a variety of sources. Teachers need to create a puzzle that cannot be solved simply by finding the answer on a particular page. To solve a WebQuest mystery, students need to put the information together by making inferences or generalizations across several information sources. The task is mostly used with students majoring in Journalism, Law and History, but can be used with students of all disciplines as it is always accompanied with great enthusiasm. Experience shows that the students majoring in Biology enjoy solving the mystery of Tutankhamen's death [4] the same way as those majoring in History.

When the language level allows it, we include journalistic tasks into language classes. The task involves gathering facts and organizing them into an account within the usual genres of news and feature writing. In evaluating student performance, we pay maximum attention to accuracy and not to creativity. The students may act as reporters covering a particular important event. A well designed journalistic task requires the students to maximize accuracy by using multiple accounts of an event, broaden their understanding by incorporating divergent opinions into their account, deepen their understanding by using background information sources, examine their own biases and minimize their impact on their writing. To design such a lesson, the teacher needs to provide the right resources and establish the importance of fairness and accuracy in reporting. The task, of course, is best performed by the students majoring in Journalism.

The tasks that require higher language proficiency and background are Analytic, Consensus building and Persuasion tasks. These tasks are the most complicated, yet the most effective ones because they successfully integrate all four skills of the language and initiate a spontaneous use of language during debates and discussions. In analytical tasks, learners are asked to look closely at one or more things and to find similarities and differences, to figure out the implications for those similarities and differences. They might look for relationships of cause and effect among variables and be asked to discuss their meaning. Consensus building tasks are ideal for controversial topics, which arouse because of differences in people's value systems stemming from differences in their perceptions and background. Webquest of this type exposes future adults to such differences and gives them practice in resolving them. The essence of a consensus building task is to consider differing viewpoints. These tasks can be adapted to any discipline as controversy is present in every field. Current events and recent history provide many resources for practice where students are required to take on different perspectives by studying different sets of resources. A persuasion task crosses the boundaries of a simple retelling by requiring students to develop a convincing case based on what they've learned. Persuasion tasks might include presenting at a mock city council hearing or a trial, writing a letter, editorial or press release, or producing a poster or videotaped ad designed to sway opinions. The key to a successful persuasion task is to change the opinion of the audience whose point of view is different or at least neutral or apathetic.

It has been noticed on many occasions that Web Quests are the part of the class that triggers the motivation of the students more than anything else. For one thing, they are eager to initiate their own small research, exploring the authentic internet materials, viewing video clips related to their specific task and eventually building some idea or opinion. Besides, they enjoy taking roles, imagining they are prominent scientists, experts, journalists etc. Also, since the model of WebQuests breaks the process down into certain steps, gradually leading the students to their ultimate goal, they don't get swamped with the abundance of information on the Web.

The first section of Web quests generally provides students with background information and mainly focus on the development of their reading and listening skills. They enable vocabulary acquisition and retention on a subconscious level. Without even realizing it, the students learn new words exploring several resources related to the same topic and in most cases the vocabulary and terms there repeat which leads to the natural learning of words increasing students reading and listening comprehension with each new task. For instance, completing a WebQuest devoted to genetic disorders, students first read theoretical background about common genetic disorders, focusing on their types and causes. Then the task section divides them into groups, where each group



has to research a different genetic disorder. While doing this they read articles about the symptoms of the particular disorder, and then listen to a real life story of someone living with that disorder. Once the group feels knowledgeable about the disorder it will have to present its findings to the class. After listening to all the presentations students will have to formulate an opinion on genetic testing of parents prior to conceiving a child. This can be done after some discussions or polemics. Finally, the students will have to present their final opinions or conclusions in a one page reflection paper.

So, as seen from above Webquest incorporates all four language skills, simultaneously developing and improving all of them. Depending on the language proficiency of the students the task can take different forms. So, the teachers themselves may choose the task type basing on the set goals and overall abilities of the students

References

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